



Fig 1 above: The Carpenters' Hall on London Wall. The bridge spans Throgmorton Avenue to the right and forms a porch over the entrance. Fig 2 right: The ceiling in the dining hall

On the night of May 10, 1941, the City of London was the object of the last large-scale air raid of the Blitz. Among the architectural casualties was Carpenters' Hall, which was gutted when the gas mains on London Wall were ignited by a 'land mine'. Fortunately, most of the Company's treasures had been stored for safety in the vaults of the building and survived the blaze. The Victorian hall, designed in an Italian Renaissance style by the architect and liveryman of the Company, William Wilmer Pocock, and begun in 1876, was otherwise left a roofless ruin. It was only the second hall to have stood on this site since the 15th century, its much-adapted medieval predecessor having been damaged by fire in 1849.

The halls of the City Livery Companies suffered badly during the war and more than 30 were seriously damaged or destroyed. Repairing them was complicated by the shortage of materials, the byzantine operations of the War Damage Commission (which paid for war damage less dilapidations) and a licensing system for construction managed by the Ministry of Works. Even so, in some ways, these Livery Company rebuilding projects led the field in the post-war resurgence of London, just as they had done after the Great Fire in 1666.

Carpenters' Hall is one of the best and most intriguing examples of this generation

of buildings, being at once historically informed yet consciously contemporary. It occupies the shell of Pocock's building, but without attempting to re-create it. This treatment creates striking juxtapositions of old and new and is in contrast to the mainstream of restored Livery Halls, most of which opted for reinstatement or complete reconstruction. No less remarkable, however, is the manner in which Carpenters' Hall seeks to celebrate in architecture the spirit of the Company's craft.

‘Carpenters' Hall is one of the most intriguing of this generation of buildings’

the architect, liveryman and former Master of the Company Sir Banister Fletcher was immediately elected chair. Sir Banister, by now in his eighties, was a doyenne of the London architectural world. He had been involved in planning the development of Greater London from the 1920s and contributed to official plans for redeveloping the City published in 1944. In his own mind, the rebuilding of Carpenters' Hall undoubtedly formed part of its vision to revive London as a modern, commercial capital.

Sir Banister's claim to popular fame, however, is the compendious *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, →





A symphony in timber

The Carpenters' Company,
Throgmorton Avenue, EC2

One of the most remarkable
Modernist interiors of post-war
London was created by a City
Livery Company to celebrate its
craft, as John Goodall explains

Photographs by Will Pryce



Fig 3: The entrance hall looking towards the main stair. Jean Clark's shields of symbols relating to Company history line the cornice

first published in 1896 in collaboration with his namesake father and never subsequently out of print. His interests as an architectural historian perhaps offer partial explanation for the important decision to preserve the shell of the gutted hall. The old hall was listed as a 'building of historic interest', but, as the present state of the City testifies, that was no guarantee of survival. Whatever the

case, the entire committee evidently had a strong emotional attachment to the Victorian building. Importantly, this determined some elements of the proposed plan including the position of the new dining hall and reception room on the first floor of the building. This, unusually, forced the Court Room (*Fig 6*), where the Company's governing body meets, onto the ground floor.

By the time of the first committee meeting, the architect of the new hall, Herbert Austen Hall, had also been selected, probably by Sir Banister. Austen Hall had established a name for himself in the 1920s as an architect for the Midland Bank. In 1942, he was one in a group of architects invited by Sir Edwin Lutyens as president of the Royal Academy to draw up plans for the post-war development of London,



published by COUNTRY LIFE. His work reflects an interest in Modernism combined with a particular admiration for Regency Classicism. He was otherwise employed in post-war City projects, including the reconstruction of Fishmongers' Hall that was completed in 1952.

Supporting Austen Hall throughout the project was Herbert Tilley, Surveyor of the Carpenters' Company. Tilley worked in Sir Banister's architectural office and it must



Fig 4: One end of the hall is overlooked by timber balconies. The pattern of the doors echoes the ceiling. Early designs show the smooth panels on the wall as sheets of marble

have been through this connection that he was appointed both to this post and that of director of the Carpenters' training school, now the Building Crafts College, from 1945–64.

During the initial committee meeting, the defining terms of the project were set out. The architect confirmed that the Victorian façade of the hall could be preserved, but would need reinforcement with steel. He observed, too, that, by reducing the ceiling heights, it would be possible to introduce an additional floor into the building (this later increased to two). Members of the committee suggested that the side of the old building facing London Wall be opened up at ground-floor level to create an internal, covered arcade and advised that the Company wine cellar could be reduced in size. The architect was then sent away

with a list of requisite rooms and instructed to draw up two sets of designs. One of these was for the hall as a building for the sole use of the Company, the other additionally creating commercial space for a restaurant.

The sketch plans were presented to the committee when it next sat on January 24, 1951, by which time the governing court of the Company offered further suggestions about the project (including the idea of demolishing the old building entirely). Most of these suggestions, together with the restaurant proposals, were rejected, but it was impossible to do anything further; the War Damage Commission paid to clear the ruins, but no building licence could be secured. For nearly three years, nothing further happened and in the interim, in 1953, Sir Banister died. →



Fig 5: The hall buffet with the Company silver set below Wheeler's *Tree of Life*. Two huge windows either side throw light into the space

When the committee met on February 19, 1954, there was stiff competition for his post. After two rounds of voting, Lt-Col William Dove, managing director of Dove Bros, an Islington building firm founded in the reign of George III, was appointed. Under Dove's chairmanship, the broad principles of the existing rebuilding were accepted, but it was now additionally demanded that 'where possible

the craft of carpentry should be in evidence throughout the building and therefore...that the ceiling of the [dining] hall should be of timber, not plaster as heretofore, also that the walls of the hall should be panelled in wood'. It was also suggested the architect consider 'building the hall across Throgmorton Avenue'.

This last recommendation—which projected the dining hall across a bridge spanning

the road to another Company property opposite—divided opinion. It was intended both to create extra space within the shell of the old building for services, office space (the idea of commercially leased space was now revived) and a larger drawing room. In addition, it oversailed the main entrance of the building as a porch. At the next meeting on April 23, 1954, contrary to the advice of the

architect, it was narrowly voted through with the chairman using his casting vote in favour of the proposal.

It was with the projection, therefore, that planning now proceeded and, after long negotiations with the relevant authorities, on October 25, 1954, the committee formally recommended Messrs Whinney, Son and Austen Hall be appointed as architects and draw up detailed plans for the new building. By January 30, 1956, after endless refinements, the project stood in the starting blocks. Work was put out to tender among several building companies connected with the Livery and the date was set for laying a Commemoration Stone on July 23, the Election Day of the next master. The contract was ultimately won by Dove Bros.

‘These additions complement this extraordinary celebration of the craft of carpentry’

In a memorandum dated February 27, 1956, the architect now raised the question of the interior treatment of the hall. The new rooms, he suggested, ‘should display the latest technics’ of carpentry ‘and also give a lead to future development in design’. That extended to incorporating a spectacular diversity of native and exotic wood in the joinery. Importantly, he went on to say that there should be historical depth to the fittings with the entrance hall on ‘traditional lines and in reasonable relation to the exterior’ of 1876, but the [dining] hall and reception rooms be of ‘contemporary character’. That implied time span, he suggested, would give ‘greater interest to the building’ than uniformity of design.

These ideas were later endorsed by the committee, but, in the meantime, attention turned to an alarming discrepancy between the expected War Damage Commission payout (£165,000) and the projected cost of the rebuilding (£375,000 excluding fees). In response, the architect removed a line of shops opening onto the new London Wall arcade and reconfigured the ground floor at a saving of about £15,000. (As a matter of fact, the final payout was just over £181,000 and the total costs including fees about £436,800, massive sums for the period). For practical reasons, it now also became necessary to stagger the renovation of the shell of the old building and construction of the new dining hall on its bridge.



Fig 6: The Court Room. Its panelled walls are lined with portraits and royal charters. Austen Hall made small typed boards to identify the collections and woods in each room

From November 1957, a new and important figure began to attend committee meetings. Clifford Wearden is described as being ‘on the staff’ of Austen Hall and attended his first meeting because the architect was ‘indisposed’. Wearden had previously worked in the office of Sir Basil Spence and now took a leading role at Carpenters’ Hall. Meanwhile, the architect was not only commissioned to design new furniture, but, in January 1958, was presented with a list of Company heirlooms that he needed to accommodate in his detailed interior decorative schemes, from 16th-century paintings detached from the walls of the medieval hall to the Company charters and portraits. Arrangements were approved by the committee, as were sample timbers for floors and walls. Likewise, estimates for carpets, furnishings and crockery and cutlery were discussed.

As the main building was being prepared for furnishing, the structure of the hall bridge was still under construction (**Fig 1**). Even by the autumn of 1958, however, the form of its timber ceiling was yet to be established. The architect presented ‘a hexagonal design in cedar wood with gold leaf embellishments’ to the committee on November 27 and was asked to render a full-size mock-up section in plywood. This ceiling, reputedly designed by Wearden, was inspected in the shell of the building on January 5, 1959, and approved with modifications (**Fig 2**), as was the treatment of the walls a month later with alternate moulded and smooth panels of timber (**Fig 4**).

As the opening approached, the sculptor Denis Dunlop, who had been commissioned

to prepare various works of art for the interior, died unexpectedly. A scheme of shields bearing motifs relating to the history of the Company (**Fig 3**) consequently had to be commissioned from the watercolourist and mural painter Jean Clark (wife of the artist Cosmo Clark). The Nottingham-born sculptor James Woodford, meanwhile, created panels for the entrance doors of the hall depicting fruits and leaves of British trees to designs drawn—surprisingly—by the Company clerk. Woodford also carved the window openings of the dining hall, an idea possibly inspired either by the 1930s decoration of the Royal Institute of British Architects at 66, Portland Place, W1, (where he also worked), or suggested by Dunlop, who created similar panels at New Filton House, Bristol.

Christopher Hussey reviewed the recently-opened Carpenters’ Hall positively in *COUNTRY LIFE* on November 19, 1964, but, two years later, the main wall of the dining hall behind the high table—originally intended for the display of a 16th-century tapestry—was transformed by the sculptor Charles Wheeler. He created the marquetry panel and sculpture of the *Tree of Life* that commands the interior today (**Fig 5**).

The great windows to either side are now also filled with stained glass of 1989 and 1991 by Alfred Fisher. These additions complement this extraordinary architectural celebration of the craft of carpentry in the living heart of a building that continues, through its Livery, to keep that tradition alive and vibrant. 🐉

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